

Sūrah ‘Alaq

Central Theme and Relationship with Previous *Sūrah*

This *sūrah* is the counterpart of Sūrah Tīn, the previous *sūrah*. There is no basic difference between the central themes of both *sūrahs*. In the previous *sūrah*, it was shown through historical facts and through the perfection found in the way man has been created that the real path of salvation is that man should profess faith and do righteous deeds. People who do not adopt this path are destined to be doomed and they themselves are responsible for this fate. In the light of this premise, the Quraysh and its leaders are warned in this *sūrah* that instead of adopting the right path they have chosen to go on the opposite path. The Almighty has revealed His book as a favour and blessing to guide them but such is the extent of their arrogance and haughtiness that they are after the life of the very person who is trying to lead them to faith and righteous deeds. So much so, if this person offers the prayer to His God, these wretched people do not even tolerate this and try to stop him by force.

Analysis of the Sequence of Discourse

Verses (1-5): The Prophet (sws) has been directed to read out the Qur’ān to these people in the name of His Lord Who is the Creator of the whole world. Such is the exalted nature of this Book that it is incumbent upon them to follow it. The Almighty has created man from a clot of congealed blood and He also has full power to re-create him. He should read out this Book to them and remind them of the favour of the Almighty whereby He made arrangements for the education and instruction of these unlettered people through the pen and the written word and instructed them about things they did not know.

Verses (6-8): The leaders of the Quraysh are rebuked on their haughtiness that their conceit in their wealth and status have made them indifferent to God even though one day everyone shall be called to account before Him.

Verses (9-13): The haughty who would stop the Prophet (sws) from praying are especially warned and threatened. In a very angry tone, they are asked that if this servant of God is rightly guided or is telling something related to piety and these rebellious people are rejecting him and showing indifference to him, then ...! The implication is that such

people should fully contemplate what their fate would be.

Verses (14-18): More rage and fury is expressed at the attitude of these rebellious people. They are rebuked on this behavior. Are they not in their senses that the Almighty is observing all their impertinent activities? If they will not refrain from their insolence, a Day is fast approaching when He shall drag these wretched and errant people by their forelocks.

Verse (19): The Prophet (sws) is urged to show perseverance and forbearance and to disregard the pranks of these rebellious people. He should prostrate and become close to the Almighty.

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ (١) خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ (٢) اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ
 (٣) الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ (٤) عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ (٥) كَلَّا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَنَافٍ (٦) أُنْزِلَتْ
 رَأَاهُ اسْتَعْنَى (٧) إِنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الرُّجْعَىٰ (٨) أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَىٰ (٩) عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّىٰ (١٠)
 أَرَأَيْتَ إِنْ كَانَ عَلَىٰ الْهُدَىٰ (١١) أَوْ أَمَرَ بِالتَّقْوَىٰ (١٢) أَرَأَيْتَ إِنْ كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ (١٣) أَلَمْ
 يَعْلَمْ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَىٰ (١٤) كَلَّا لَئِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهِ لَنَسْفَعَنَّا بِالنَّاصِيَةِ (١٥) نَاصِيَةٍ كَاذِبَةٍ خَاطِئَةٍ (١٦)
 فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُ (١٧) سَنَدْعُ الزَّبَانِيَةَ (١٨) كَلَّا لَا تَطِعُهُ وَاسْجُدْ وَاقْتَرِبْ (١٩)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

Read in the name of your Lord Who created – created man from a clot of congealed blood. Read and your Lord is the most Bounteous Who taught by the pen. He taught man what he knew not. (1-5)

Certainly not! Indeed, man is being rebellious considering himself to be self-sufficient. Indeed, to His Lord is the return. (7-8)

Just look at him who forbids a servant when he prays. Just consider if this person is rightly guided or urges others to virtue ... ! Just see if this person denied and turned away ... ! Does he not know that Allah is observing? (9-14)

Certainly not! If he does not desist, We shall drag him by the forelock, a lying, sinful forelock. Then let him call his faction. We shall summon Our guards. (15-18)

Certainly not! Do not obey him and bow down in prostration and draw near. (19)

Explanation

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ^(١)

The word اقْرَأْ (read) is not merely used to convey what a teacher would say to a student in order to ask him to read. It is also used to ask others to read the way it is in اَتْلُ عَلَى النَّاسِ (read it out to people and اَتْلُ عَلَى النَّاسِ (recite it out to people). This usage is found at many places in the Qur'ān. For example, while addressing the disbelievers who would cause a hindrance at the Qur'ān being read out to them, it is said:

وَإِذَا قُرِئَ الْقُرْآنُ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ وَأَنْصِتُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ (٢٠٤:٧)

And when the Qur'ān is recited out, listen to it in silence so that you may be shown mercy. (7:204)

At another place, the words are:

وَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ جَعَلْنَا بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ حِجَابًا مَّسْتُورًا (٤٥:١٧)

And when you recite out the Qur'ān, We place between you and those who deny the life to come a hidden barrier. (17:45)

The indication to this usage is present within the verses.

The expression اِقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ directs the Prophet (sws) to read out the Qur'ān in the name of his Lord Who is the creator of all the world. This is a very important warning. The Prophet (sws) should present this Qur'ān as a directive from God which must necessarily be followed so that they know that what is being recited out to them is directly from God. These are not the words of some preacher nor of any other person. It is also not a request which can be turned down. It is in fact the word of the God Who has the right to give orders to His creation and it is the obligation of the people to obey it without the slightest of hesitation. They should not dare evade it or make fun of it or oppose it while considering it to be something trivial.

It should be kept in consideration that the Qur'ān is the word of God. No other Book before it has the honour to be entirely composed of the words revealed by God. For this reason, the Prophet (sws) has been directed to present it in the name of His Lord so that people are able to gauge its real exaltedness and they should not let themselves become a target of God's wrath by opposing it. It has been mentioned in the predictions recorded in previous divine scriptures about the advent of Muḥammad (sws) that

1. Read in the name of your Lord Who created.

whatever he will say, he will say in the name of God and the Almighty will take revenge from those people who will reject what is said to them in His name.² It is as if these words not only convey the exaltedness of the Qur'ān, they also warn the Quraysh that if they want to oppose it they must deeply contemplate the fate of this attitude of theirs.

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ (٢)³

This is an expression of the specific after the general. The first verse mentions the creation of all the world and this verse emphatically mentions the creation of man.

The word عَلَق means a clot of congealed blood. At many places in the Qur'ān, a reminder is sounded about the early stages of a child's development in the womb. Thus among others, Sūrahs Ḥajj, Mu'minūn, Sajdah, Qiyāmah and Dahr mention these stages. At all these places, we have already explained the important words of the respective verses and also the special aspect which is intended through this reminder. In general, attention is meant to be focused on three issues:

Firstly, if the extent of power and wisdom of God is such that it fashions out a living being having such faculties as sight, hearing and intellect, how can it be difficult for Him to re-create such a living being?

Secondly, the powers and wisdom of God which are evident in man shows that he has not been created without a purpose: there shall come a day of accountability wherein he shall be rewarded or punished for his deeds.

Thirdly, it is not befitting for man who has been created from such a trivial and inconsequential stuff to show conceit and pride by indulging in self-glorification and self-veneration.

At some places in the Qur'ān, man is reminded of all these three issues and at some places just one or two of them are meant to be reminded of. It is evident from the context and nature of the discourse that here the first two issues are meant to be reminded of. The objective is that the Prophet (sws) should present the Book of God specifically in His name and should remind them that the God Who has created man from a clot

2. Reference is to the following words of the Old Testament:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to My words that the prophet speaks in My name, I myself will call him to account. (Deuteronomy, 18:18)

3. Created man from a clot of congealed blood.

of congealed blood is fully capable of re-creating him and then calling him to account.

اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ (۳) الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ (۴)

The word اقْرَأْ mentioned in this verse is a permutative (بدل) of the one mentioned in the first and emphasizes the directive mentioned there. However, in this verse there also exists an expression of divine favour: the Quraysh should value the great blessing of the Almighty whereby He guided them through the pen. One should know that before the revelation of the Qur'ān, whatever teachings of the Prophets Abraham (sws) and Ishmael survived with the Ishmaelites were in the form of oral traditions. With the passage of time alterations had crept in them. As far as the teachings of other prophets of God are concerned, they too were given in oral form. Though Moses (sws) was given the Ten Commandments in written form, however the Torah we have today is only a written record of tradition: it is impossible to distinguish what section of it is in the words of God and what is in the words of unknown narrators. However, for the Qur'ān the Almighty made elaborate arrangements that all of it be composed of His words; moreover, it was not left to mere oral tradition: it was preserved in writing in the very words of God. As has already been explained in the *tafsīr* of Sūrah Qalam and Sūrah Qiyāmah, this task was accomplished under the scrutiny of God Almighty so that everything is preserved word for word.

This particular aspect of preservation is mentioned by the words عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ. There is no doubt that this was a great favour for the Arabs. In the first place, as indicated earlier, this form of preservation of divine revelation had not been adopted previously and secondly, since the Arabs were unlettered they were not fully aware of the use of the pen but because of the Qur'ān they preserved through it this treasure of divine revelation which was not merely an asset for them: it was meant for all mankind.

عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ (۵)

Mentioned in this verse is another aspect of the divine favour alluded to in the previous verse: the unlettered Arabs were not only bestowed with divine guidance in written form, they were further blessed with teachings they were not aware of. Though a general word الْإِنْسَانَ (man) is used in this verse; however, since the first addressees of the Qur'ān were

4. Read and your Lord is the most Bounteous Who taught by the pen.

5. He taught man what he knew not.

the unlettered Arabs, therefore, this word is primarily spoken for them. It was the special favour of the Almighty that He led them out of the darkness of ignorance by revealing to them this complete guidance. It is now their obligation to value and honour it. In Sūrah Jumu'ah, this aspect is discussed in the following words:

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ
وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ (٢:٦٢)

It is He that has sent forth among the unlettered a prophet from among themselves. He recites to them His revelations and purifies them, and instructs them in the Book and in wisdom, though before this they had been in manifest error. (62:2)

With slight difference in style, this aspect is also discussed in verses 151 and 198 of Sūrah Baqarah and verse 164 of Sūrah 'Āli 'Imra#n and we have already fully explained it.

Just as this verse bestows a favour on the Quraysh, it also warns them: if they do not value and respect this greatest favour of God, they should then contemplate what fate they will meet for their ingratitude and arrogance.

كَلَّا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَنَّاظٍ (٦) أَنْ رَّأَهُ اسْتَعْتَصَى (٧)^٦

This verse depicts the behaviour of the Arabs which they adopted with this guidance of God: instead of duly honouring it, they are rejecting it out of sheer arrogance; the reason for this is that their wealth and resources have made them indifferent to God.

This verse begins with the emphatic negative particle كَلَّا (certainly not). It is meant to negate the excuses the Quraysh would make in rejecting the Qur'ān and the Prophet (sws). These excuses fabricated by them are meant to cover up the reality. The real reason of their rejection was considering themselves self-sufficient from God and their love for this world. However, they would pretend as if they had certain objections for which they were not receiving satisfactory answers.

إِنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الرُّجْعَىٰ (٨)^٧

The word رُجْعَى is a verbal noun similar to بُشْرَى and means "to return".

6. Certainly not! Indeed man is being rebellious considering himself to be self-sufficient.

7. Indeed, to His Lord is the return.

The implication is that the Prophet (sws) should let them do what they are doing. Finally, they will have to return to their Lord to whom they have become indifferent and fearless. At that time, they will come to know the fate of their arrogance. If they think that their alleged deities will be their saviours and Lords, then they will come to know how baseless their view is. On that Day, only God will reign supreme and no one else will be able to save a person from His grasp.

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَى (٩) عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّى (١٠)^٨

Mentioned in this verse is an example of their rebellious attitude referred to earlier. The heard-hearts among the Quraysh are alluded to here who would stop the Prophet (sws) and other Muslims from praying. The foremost obligation of a person towards his Lord is serving and worshipping Him and the foremost manifestation of worship is the prayer. Thus a person in praying is discharging his foremost obligation towards his Lord and is worthy of being shown respect for this deed. He should be regarded as someone worth following in this matter. If someone is audacious enough to stop him in this regard, then this would mean that he is stopping someone from discharging his foremost obligation towards God.

We have explained at various places in this *tafsīr* that the style أَرَأَيْتَ is used to direct the attention of people to something very inappropriate or to criticize someone. Expressions such as “just look at him”, “have you seen him” and “take a look at what he is doing” are its equivalents in the English language.

It is not necessary that a specific person be considered to be implied by the word الَّذِي. It can be used to portray people who indulge in such unworthy activity. We have already explained this style in this *tafsīr*. It was not Abū Jahl only who would stop the Prophet (sws) from praying; there were other ruffians besides him too who would do so and these ruffians would not stop the Prophet (sws) only from praying; they would stop other servants of God also from praying.

أَرَأَيْتَ إِنْ كَانَ عَلَى الْهُدَى (١١) أَوْ أَمَرَ بِالتَّقْوَى (١٢)^٩

The implication is that before taking this foolish step, the person should have thought that in his frenzy against Islam, he should not have become so overcome as to not even contemplate the fate that he will meet. Is not there a chance that this servant of God is on the right path and with his

8. Just see him who forbids a servant when he prays.

9. Just consider if this person is rightly guided or urges [others] to virtue ... !

words and deeds calls others to piety and virtue? Will disregarding this possibility, this person would then be merely inviting the wrath of God. In other words, on what basis does he regard this frenzied step of his to be correct – a step which can only be taken by Satan.

أَرَأَيْتَ إِنْ كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى¹⁰ (١٣)

This is a reference to the second possibility we have referred to above: what if this person was the one who denied and who turned away, then ...! The implication is that in this case it would be he who would be responsible for opening the door to Hell. Here, an ellipsis of the overall apodosis has occurred to point to the fact that its severity is beyond words – a common style of classical Arabic. An example of such an ellipsis can also be seen in Sūrah Yūnus.

The fate of the people who reject the Prophet (sws) and turn away from his call is mentioned thus in Sūrah Layl:

لَا يَصْلَاهَا إِلَّا الْأَشْقَى الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى (٩٢: ١٥-١٦)

Only those wretched creatures shall enter Hell who denied and turned away. (92:15-16)

أَلَمْ يَعْلَم بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَى¹¹ (١٤)

The implication of this verse is that does such a person not realize that the Almighty is watching all his unrestrained behaviour. Now if He is and surely He is, then He will definitely take its revenge. He is just, merciful, powerful and has a great sense of honour. If His servants are stopped from worshipping Him, how can he tolerate this as a bystander.

كَلَّا لَئِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهِ لَنَسْفَعَنَّ بِالنَّاصِيَةِ¹² (١٥)

This verse sounds a severe warning to such arrogant people. The word *نَاصِيَةٍ* refers to the forehead and the hair scattered over it. The word *سَفَعٌ* means to drag something by grabbing it in the fist. In Sūrah Raḥmān, the fate of such people is mentioned thus: *فَيُؤْخَذُ بِالنَّوَاصِي وَ الْأَقْدَامِ* (٥٥: ٤١) (Then they shall be grasped by their forelocks and legs and thrown in Hell. (55:41).

10. Just see if this person denied and turned away ... !

11. Does he not know that Allah is observing [him]?

12. Certainly not! If he does not desist, We shall drag him by the forelock.

نَاصِيَةٍ كَاذِبَةٍ خَاطِئَةٍ (١٦)¹³

The word نَاصِيَةٍ is a permutative (بدل) of the النَّاصِيَةِ of the previous verse. Though the former is not defined by the article *alif lām* and the latter is, yet such a grammatical interpretation is possible because the نَاصِيَةِ of this verse is defined by an adjective and such a noun can technically be regarded as a permutative (بدل) of a noun defined by the article *alif lām*.

The anger and rage which seems to be exuding from every word of this verse is worth noting. The forelocks of such ruffians are mentioned in very harsh words. The face and forehead is the most honourable part of body and for this reason, at times, signifies the whole personality of a person as is the case here. Also the greatest honour for a forehead is the mark of prostration that becomes stamped on it. If a person is so callous that not only he himself does not prostrate before God, but also stops others from prostrating before Him, then such a wretched person is worthy of being grabbed by the forelock and thrown in Hell.

فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُ (١٧) سَنَدْعُ الزَّبَانِيَةَ (١٨)¹⁴

This is a challenge thrown to these arrogant people. If they are bigheaded about their power, then they should call all their allies and the Almighty will call His guards and see how much power they have. The first practical test of this challenge in the later period was in the battlefield of Badr and the world witnessed that the whole power and collectivity of the Quraysh was humiliated at the hands of the Almighty's guards.

The real meaning of the word نَادِي is "a gathering", "a society". Here, in this verse, it refers to individuals who are associated together in some communal relationship. Keeping in view the context, it can be translated as "group" and "party".

The word زَبَانِيَّة is the plural of زَبْنِيَّة and its real meaning is "defender"; however, it is also used for policemen and law enforcing personnel. It has been translated as "guards" keeping in view the context. In other words, this is a divine task force of angels which is sent for special missions which are temporary in nature.

كَلَّا لَا تُطِيعُوهُ وَاسْجُدْ وَاقْتَرِبْ (١٩)¹⁵

These words sound assurance to the Prophet (sws): if someone is

13. A lying, sinful forelock.

14. Then let him call his faction. We shall summon Our guards.

15. Certainly not! Do not obey him and bow down in prostration and draw near.

stopping him from prostrating before God, just ignore him and draw nearer the Almighty by prostrating before Him. It should be kept in mind that at many places the Qur’ān has regarded the prayer as the key to perseverance and resolve and to earning His help. The most grand component of the prayer is prostration. This is an allusion to the fact that who would dare stop the Prophet (sws) from something which is the objective of his life and the sole means of his relationship with God. If any one does dare to do such a thing, he should seek refuge with the Almighty. The only way to do this is to prostrate before Him.

Period of Revelation of the Sūrah

This brings us to the end of the explanation of this *sūrah*. Let us now deliberate on its period of revelation by analyzing its contents. The most helpful thing in determining the period of revelation of a *sūrah* is to deliberate on its tone, address and style of address. For this very reason, I have raised this question at the end of the explanation instead of discussing it in the introductory part of the *sūrah*. Readers can form an opinion for themselves on this issue about which our exegetes have different opinions.

The most famous opinion on the period of revelation of this *sūrah* is that it is the first revealed *sūrah* of the Qur’ān. Some people regard the whole *sūrah* as the first revelation of the Qur’ān, but the majority regards its first five verses to be the first revelation of the Qur’ān. This latter opinion is based on a narrative in *Bukhārī* and *Muslim*.

The second opinion is that of Zamakhsharī. He has recorded in his *tafsīr*: وأكثر المفسرين على أن الفاتحة أول ما نزل ثم سورة القلم (And most exegetes are of the view that Sūrah Fātiḥah was revealed the foremost and then Sūrah Qalam).¹⁶ Some exegetes have differed with this opinion and some have accepted it.

A third opinion on this issue is that Sūrah Muddaththir was revealed the foremost. The proponents of this view most probably regard its initial verses only as the first revelation because the tone of the rest of the *sūrah* and its style of address is so stern and severe like Sūrah ‘Alaq that it is very difficult to regard the whole *sūrah* as the first revelation.

In my opinion, Sūrah ‘Alaq is a harmonious whole and a single well-knit unit. The tone of its first five verses is no different from that of the rest of the *sūrah*. Such is the severity in its style of address that one fails to understand that why should such a *sūrah* be regarded as the first revelation. Moreover, there is no indication within the *sūrah* to regard it

16. Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4 ((Beirut Dār iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 784.

to have been revealed in two episodes. God knows best. This is my opinion and gratitude be to Him.

Lahore,

4th March, 1980 AD

16th Rabī al-Thānī, 1400 AH
